

Reagan essays reveal his intellect

Insightful, complex analyses contradict foes' 'dunce' claims

By Larry Witham
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Hundreds of recently discovered policy essays by Ronald Reagan from the 1970s reveal a "one-man think tank," not the "amiable dunce" portrayed by his critics, editors of the documents say.

The 670 handwritten radio commentaries are what's left of more than 1,000 composed between 1975 and 1979. They were lost in storage boxes, but now may be the best archive of the 40th president's original thinking.

"We discovered that the guy has been writing all his life," said Martin Anderson, domestic-policy adviser to Mr. Reagan and co-editor of an anthology of more than 200 essays and other works. "We kept marveling at the clarity of his writing, but also the breadth of issues."

Some of the cache will be serial-



President Reagan

ized in the New York Times next year, and Simon and Schuster has embargoed quotes from the works until the book's February release.

"We're just going to put out the original drafts and let people decide" the literary and intellectual merit, he said, arguing that Mr. Reagan comes across as a "one-man think tank."

Besides this find, little remains of Mr. Reagan's lifelong paper trail of handwritten documents.

The yellow notepad leaves were found by Kiron K. Skinner, a Harvard graduate and Democrat who was only the second person given access to Mr. Reagan's private papers, still in some disorder.

"One day she walked in and said, 'Look at this. There are a lot of them,'" Mr. Anderson said. Miss Skinner, a specialist in Cold War foreign policy, now teaches at Carnegie Mellon University.

Mr. Anderson also found unknown Reagan writings when, at Nancy Reagan's request, he cleaned out the president's Los Angeles desk after he went into seclusion because of Alzheimer's disease.

The bulk of the newly discovered documents are first-draft, final-draft radio talks given for five minutes, five days a week. They were heard by tens of millions of listeners but never archived.

"They were not written for posterity," Mr. Anderson said. But he said they prove that Mr. Reagan read widely, analyzed nearly every complex issue of the day, and

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stated his position with compelling literary quality.

"It's extraordinary to see these written out in hand," Mr. Anderson said. "You see his corrections. You see his mind at work. I know a lot of intelligent people who can't write. But I don't know any person who writes this well who is not intelligent."

The book also includes 20 other Reagan writings, from poems to fiction and letters, from 1925 to 1994. That year he penned a final letter to Americans about his "journey . . . into the sunset of my life" with Alzheimer's.

Foreign-policy experts also have identified one five-page script, titled "Mr. Minister" — found in Mr. Reagan's desk — as what Mr. Anderson called the president's "talking points for the entire U.S. strategy" in opening U.S.-Soviet relations.

Marvin Kranz, a historian at the Library of Congress, has not seen the essays, but agrees they might change opinions.

"If they show a side of Reagan we didn't know, that would change our image to someone of greater

intellectual wattage than he'd been known for," Mr. Kranz said. "His critics have been very harsh."

Mr. Kranz said lost presidential materials rarely shatter scholarly opinion, but they can surprise. Two notable cases were Robert Lincoln's closure of his father's papers for decades and Millard Fillmore's letters being found in a New York barn long after his death.

Hoover Institution fellow Arnold Beichman has read the material and calls it an "astounding revelation" about a man assumed by his staff and the news media to be a "great communicator" but a lightweight thinker.

"He was called an 'amiable dunce,' and the media made him out to be a half-wit surrounded by a bunch of geniuses," he said. The essays will "force academics to revise their scholarship."

Some have said that the assumption that Reagan was not intellectually gifted is so strong that even biographer Edmund Morris overlooked the implication of the essays, from which he cited a few lines as the first to gain access to the private papers.

The Morris book, friends of the president say, perpetuated the so-called "mystery" of how such a

simple mind could accomplish so much politically.

Mr. Anderson said the answer may be that Mr. Reagan had a deep intelligence, seen when he read a newspaper at age five, but not flaunted during his political career.

"He never argued with anyone," Mr. Anderson said. "He never gave orders to anyone. Yet he made every single key decision."

With the discovery, the editors interviewed Mr. Reagan's secretary and drivers — former state troopers — who traveled and stayed with him between 1975 and 1979.

"Very few people were around him when he was writing, except the state troopers," Mr. Anderson said. "They said, 'All the guy did was work. He read all the time. Wrote all the time.'"

This may give credence to one theory that Mr. Reagan's incipient Alzheimer's at the end of his political career allowed pundits to label him weak-minded.

Mr. Anderson said the truth about the Hollywood actor-turned-statesman may be what biographer Mr. Morris said of the Alzheimer's letter — that it had a touch of "genius."